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ABSTRACT

Because of changes in welfare eligibility, the education system, and employment and training opportunities, it has become more likely that young people who have had difficulty with the mainstream schooling system and who face a lack of employment options will end up in adult education. Educators in the adult education classroom have an opportunity to make this a valuable experience for these young people. Factors for educators in these settings to consider are the following: the stages of adolescent development; risk and resilience factors; and how to apply an understanding of risk and resilience to an educational setting. Educational practices that may prove positive include the following: (1) see any interaction as an opportunity; (2) take a caring, friendly, open and unhurried approach; (3) listen to the young person and provide positive feedback; (4) acknowledge and compliment them for turning up, discussing sensitive issues, and making an effort; (5) positively reframe; (6) model respect for the young person's life experience and insight; and (7) lend firm, fair, and consistent control. (KC)

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Building Resilience: Helping Young Adults in the Adult Education Classroom.

Elly Robinson

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Building resilience – helping young adults in the adult education classroom

*By **Elly Robinson**, Education and Training Consultant, Centre for Adolescent Health, Royal Children's Hospital, Melbourne.*

Changes in welfare eligibility, the education system, and employment/training opportunities over recent years have redefined the available pathways for young people into the world of adulthood. In particular, it has become more and more likely that young people who have had difficulty with the mainstream schooling system and who face a lack of employment options will end up in the adult educator's classroom.

The dynamics of such a classroom may instantly change with the introduction of the young learner. Whilst there may be different issues according to whether they are voluntary or involuntary students, young people in general often learn and interact in different ways from adult learners, which may cause difficulties in a classroom containing both.

Whilst it may seem like a challenge, and perhaps an unwelcome one, the young person in your classroom is at a critical stage of development. It is a time where their prior and current learning experiences meet to shape the values that they will place on education and learning for life. As an educator, you have the capacity to make this experience as valuable as possible for them. Some suggestions for understanding young people's behaviour and its motives, and ways of enhancing the learning experience, are presented within this article.

ADOLESCENT DEVELOPMENT

An understanding of what is going on in terms of development at this age provides us with some clues as to why behaviour is occurring, and how we can best understand this in order to promote a healthy learning environment.

There are three stages of development in adolescence – early (10-14 years), middle (15-17 years) and late (18+ years). Middle to late adolescence is characterised by the increased role and importance of the peer group, amidst a decreasing reliance on parents. Relationships with others are often narcissistic, driven by what the young person can gain. Risk-taking behaviours, for example drug use and unsafe sexual behaviour, are common at this age as the young person tests his/her limits.

Psychological theorist Erik Erikson likens this behaviour to living in a 'hall of mirrors' – a young person takes an action then stands back to watch the many reflections or reactions of those around him/her. As a young person grows into late adolescence, they feel less of a need to do this as the reactions of others become more predictable – thus they can hypothesise about responses to their behaviours and whether or not they wish to facilitate this response.

The implication is that we need to understand adolescents as not being fully developed in a number of domains, including cognition, values and morals systems and identity. They have often adapted ways of behaving and communicating which can be thought of as 'primitive' survival techniques, rather than based on common sense or a sense of future consequences.

Cognitive processes at this age move from egocentric thinking, i.e. thought is almost exclusively tied to self, to sociocentric thinking, which means they now recognise that others have thoughts as well, and that they are not necessarily as focused on the adolescent as the adolescent is upon him/herself. However, in new or threatening situations a young person of this age often slips back into egocentric thinking as a defence mechanism. In this sense, they may actually be unable to think about how their behaviour impacts on others, a situation which is often misconstrued as misbehaviour or disruptiveness. We can see how in

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The ***ARIS Resources Bulletin*** is the quarterly journal of the Adult Education Resource and Information Service (ARIS).

Resources are reviewed by language and literacy professionals.

If you would like to be part of the review team please phone ***Robyn Hodge*** or ***Corinna Ridley*** at ***Language Australia*** on ***(03) 9926.4779.***

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Elly's role at the Centre for Adolescent Health involves the writing and production of distance education materials for students of the Graduate Diploma in Adolescent Health and Welfare (University of Melbourne), multimedia development, conducting workshops, lectures and seminars, student support and marketing & promotion. Elly is also currently in an acting role as the Media Co-Ordinator for the Centre.

She is interested in the areas of mass media, particularly the Internet, as it relates to young people, mental health, sexual health and drug issues. She is currently studying a Master of Public Health at UNSW.

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an unfamiliar adult learning environment, when educational experiences have been unrewarding in the past, the situation may invoke a return to a focus on the self instead of others.

Identity development is also occurring in adolescence. It is likely that some of the young learners will be 'identity diffused', or unsure of their future and who they are, due to a lack of positive learning experiences and detrimental family environments. These young people often entrust themselves to luck or fate, believing that they have no control over their lives. They often adopt an 'I don't care' attitude, which is a defence mechanism against an enduring feeling of powerlessness. This long-term diffusion is a risk factor for drug use and abuse.

Shifting a young person's development in any of these domains is one of the key outcomes of good education and training programs. It is no wonder, then, that a young person who has had a limited and/or negative experience with the education system to date has failed to prosper in their development. These delays in turn can contribute to a diminished level of health and well-being for the young person as they are 'left behind' in a ruthless society.

RISK AND RESILIENCE FRAMEWORK

When we talk about young people's health status, we need to examine what is happening for them in the different 'worlds' [1]in which they live, that is family, school, peers and the individual, and the overriding culture and community. Their health status is dependent on the number of risk and resilience factors in each of these 'worlds'.

Melbourne-based adolescent psychologist Andrew Fuller (1998)[2] defines **resiliency** as:

> *...the happy knack of being able to bungy jump through life. Even when hardship and adversity arise, it is as if the person has an elasticised rope around them that helps them to rebound when things get low and to maintain their sense of who they are as a person.*

Resiliency is not innate; rather, it derives from the interaction between the individual and the environment. Resiliency and resilience factors enable an individual to successfully cope with negative life events.

Resilience factors are defined as factors which, if present, decrease the likelihood of negative health and social outcomes. Conversely, **risk factors** are defined as hazards that, if present for a given individual, make it more likely that this individual will develop difficulties.[3]

Therefore, the more risk factors present in a young person's life the increased likelihood that they will engage in risk taking behaviours, and vice versa for resilience factors. If risk and resilience factors both exist in a young person's life, resilience factors tend to 'counteract' the effect of the risk factors. This depends, however, on the number and nature of these factors in the young person's life.

The young people appearing in adult classes often present as 'hamburgers with the lot' of risk factors – poverty, low school achievement, low self-esteem, no hope for the future, physical/mental illness etc. What we do know now, however, as a result of recent research[4] is that enhancing available resilience factors in a young person's life, in the school, family, work, community and peer worlds can still offset the effects of less changeable risk factors.

Examples of adaptable resilience factors which are applicable to these young people, specifically in an education setting, include the following:

- Having a sense of belonging/connectedness to school/educational institution
- Positive achievements and evaluations in a school/educational setting
- Having someone who believes in you
- Having a positive relationship with an adult outside of the family
- Having a special gift, ability or talent

APPLYING THE FRAMEWORK TO AN EDUCATIONAL SETTING

Working effectively with young people in your classroom requires a reworking of the teacher/student relationship to help facilitate the building of resilience factors in their lives. It is unlikely that the traditional model of didactic learning has worked with these young people; nor has classroom discipline, behaviour modification or other strategies.

The mistake we can make, however, is to assume that these young people have nothing to offer, or wish to learn nothing, when we need to work from the position where they have something to give, and simply need some help discover what this is. The most effective way to facilitate this is to work alongside the young person at least, and from a position of 'one down' at best. This changed dynamic is not designed to be a shift of power, but requires an educator who is prepared to be humble in order to facilitate what may be the young person's first experience of 'knowing something' that is taken seriously by someone else.

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Initially this may be about their music tastes, or who won the footy on the weekend. Once their confidence grows in the acceptance of their knowledge, the door is open for a reciprocal learning relationship to occur. Other, mature students may be willing to play a similar role with some young learners, without it compromising their own learning experiences.

Psychologist R.D. Laing once said that how we 'treat' someone, in all the small daily interactions we have with them, adds up to our 'treatment' of them. Positive interactions are composed of building self-efficacy, empathy, positive regard, a focus on strengths and abilities, support and reinforcement of efforts, modelling and empowerment.

The following are what we consider to be 'youth sensitive' practices that can be used in any interaction with a young person, regardless of the time frame for engagement. These practices operate to build resiliency by enhancing a sense of inner self, which in turn allows them to build the skills needed for engagement with the outer world:

- **Any interaction is an opportunity.** Each time the young person interacts with you in daily living (i.e. a formal counselling setting is not a prerequisite for change), is an opportunity to pass on a positive message, complement them or talk about what is going on in their life or in their efforts to learn. It is the quality of these messages that is important, not the quantity.
- **A caring, friendly, open and unhurried approach.** Often these young people have experienced chaotic lives where care and attention has been conditional. This approach models an alternative.
- **Listen to the young person and provide positive feedback.** It is important, however, to only praise what is good. These young people have finely tuned receptors when it comes to insincerity.
- **Acknowledge and compliment them for turning up, discussing sensitive issues, making an effort, etc.** Such positive regard may be somewhat alien to the young person, and as a result silence, hostility or even anger may meet it. But remember, these are the outer layers of feelings that may be safer for the young person to express rather than the fear or sadness at their core.
- **Positively reframe.** The young person may often talk down themselves, their family, their ability or other aspects of their being. They may be cynical and negative about the future and often have had good reason to be; again, this may be a reflection of their identity diffusion. Help them reconsider how they can express their feelings in a more positive light, e.g. "You may be finding this assignment hard. But remember, you felt the same about the last one at first and you managed to do a great job in the end."
- **Model respect for the young person's life experience and insight.** No matter what the frustration levels of the rest of the class, you need to model some control and a sense of understanding as to the young person's previous experiences. The fact that their life experience is different does not automatically mean they have less to offer or contribute.
- **Lend control – firm, fair and consistent.** It is a false assumption that young people do not want boundaries around their behaviour – in fact, they often express a need for boundaries as long as they are consistent and the same for all in the class.

Courses available through the Centre for Adolescent Health.

Graduate Diploma in Adolescent Health and Welfare

The Centre for Adolescent Health has established a Graduate Diploma/Certificate in Adolescent Health and Welfare, offered through the Faculty of Medicine, Dentistry and Health Sciences, University of Melbourne. This multidisciplinary course aims to give a broad range of workers the skills, knowledge and strategies to work effectively with young people. It is our mission to have one graduate of this course with specialist skills in adolescent health in every Australian community.

Subjects covered include: Adolescent Development, Professional Skills, Socio-Envionmental Context, Mental Health, Drug Issues, Individual Differences in Learning, Young people at Risk, Youth Participation. On-campus or distance education modes available. For more information phone (03) 9345 6652 or email <etu@cryptic.rch.unimelb.edu.au

Short Courses

The Centre also offers a series of contemporary short courses specialising in particular issues relevant to working with young people. Participants have the opportunity to undertake each short course as a professional development unit (non-assessed) or as an accredited University subject which articulates into the Graduate Diploma in Adolescent Health and Welfare (assessed). Subjects include Drug Issues, Mental Health, Young People at Risk and Youth Participation. All courses can be offered via distance education or weekly lectures/weekend workshops (subject to numbers). For more information Ph (03) 9345 6652 or email <etu@cryptic.rch.unimelb.edu.au

COME AND HEAR ELLY ROBINSON

Elly Robinson will be delivering a workshop on Working with Youth as part of the ARIS PD program for Semester 1, 2001.

This workshop details recent and relevant research into stages of youth development and raises important issues for curriculum development.

When: Friday March 16, 9.15am – 1.00pm

Where: To be advised

Cost: $60.50 (GST inclusive)

For more information contact ARIS for a copy of PD program for Semester 1 2001 on 03 99264779.

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These young people's educational experiences have often been built up over years and years of bad school incidents, unsympathetic school staff, unsupportive families and a general feeling of hopelessness and helplessness. Parents have often had negative school experiences themselves and thus may be less likely to have encouraged or valued a good education for their children.

We can't necessarily expect to change such behaviours, or to make a meaningful difference, in an eight-week course. Be realistic about what is achievable, but don't be pessimistic either - you have an opportunity to put in place some small steps forward.

Those who don't wish to be there are the greatest challenge for you. Take it on. It may be frustrating, it might seem a waste of time and you may not see the fruits of your efforts in the short time available to you. On the other hand, it may offer you the most rewarding experience you ever have as an educator. If you can make the slightest inkling of difference in terms of their impressions of education and their perceptions of educators, then you have done your part in making their ongoing education experiences that much more meaningful.

If the challenge starts to frustrate you, it may help to bear in mind the words of adolescent health expert Michael Resnick: "Young people are resources to be developed, not problems to be solved...never, ever give up on a young person."

Thanks to Karen Field for her assistance with this article.

1 Dr John Court, Adolescent Physician, Centre for Adolescent Health, Melbourne.

2 Fuller, A. (1998) *From Surviving to Thriving – Promoting Mental Health in Young People*. ACER Press: Melbourne.

3 Resnick, M., Harris, L. & Blum, R. (1993) 'The impact of caring and connectedness on adolescent health and wellbeing' *Journal of Pediatric Child Health* Vol. 29S3-S9.

4 Bond, L., Thomas, L., Toumbourou, J., Patton, G. & Catalano, R. (2000) Improving the Lives of Young Victorians in Our Community: a survey of risk and resilience factors. Melbourne: Centre for Adolescent Health.

Moving the Margins –

successful programs for marginalised youth

*By **Julie McClimont**, Education Coordinator, The Salvation Army, Brunswick JPET Program*

The Federal Government's introduction of 'Mutual Obligation' for benefit recipients has led to a huge influx of marginalised young people into the ACE sector. Whilst I have heard stories of classes consisting of a room full of adults who listen, engage, bring you cakes and want to learn from you, my experience in the ACE sector has been very different. I have been working with youth at risk. However, I consider myself to have an extremely rewarding and fulfilling job, because of my opportunity to encourage and nurture these young people and then watch their confidence grow and skills develop. After a brief overview of the Northern Melbourne Institute of TAFE (NMIT) Job Placement and Training (JPET) education program I am involved in, I would like to share some ideas for working with youth in the ACE sector.

BACKGROUND

When the Salvation Army Brunswick JPET was first established, its program was largely recreational and used as a means of connecting workers with young people. After connections were made, JPET workers attempted to re-engage young people in work education and training. However, it was realised that they were not ready for such pathways.

JPET services a particularly disadvantaged sector of the labour market.

News from the Melbourne Museum

***Margaret Griffith**, Program Coordinator, Public Activity Programs Melbourne Museum, Carlton Gardens, Nicholson Street, Melbourne.*

Melbourne Museum has now opened, and it's a great resource for adult education.

The Australia Gallery, Bunjilaka (the Aboriginal Gallery), the Pacific Gallery, parts of the Children's Museum, Body Art, and all the public spaces are alive with great exhibitions and a lively program of performances and activities. Wednesdays to Saturdays during daylight saving, Melbourne Museum is open until 9.00 pm.

As all galleries are not yet open, admission is half price until March 9 2001. Half price admission for both school and adult students in groups is $3.30. (Body Art is separately ticketed - $8, conc $6). Book your group in by phoning 1300 130 152.

As an educator, you are welcome to come to the Museum free of charge to plan your group's visit. At the ticket desk, simply present a sheet of your organisation's letterhead with a note from your manager/prinicipal/coordinator explaining who you are and what classes you take.

A series of Professional Development sessions is currently being planned. Watch the ARIS publications for details.

For more information on adult education programs at Melbourne Museum contact Geraldine Zeccola, tel 8341 7208, and Margaret Griffith 8341 7150.